Finnish Higher Education Policy and the Ongoing Bologna Process

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The Bologna train is running at full speed. The next stop at ministerial level is the Berlin follow-up meeting to be held on 18–19 September 2003. This article is an attempt to investigate the background to the Bologna Process, which, with all the haste, has remained rather obscure. It examines how the educational policy of the EEC/EU has reached a stage at which one can speak of a European Higher Education Area with reference to the concepts of harmonization and the Bologna Process. It will also examine possible future scenarios, focusing particularly on the Finnish situation. Why has Finland been so keen to embark on reforms? What does Finnish higher education policy aim to achieve through the Bologna Process, and what does it stand to gain from it?

INTRODUCTION

The progress of the so-called Bologna Process, the European-wide project aimed at creating a European Higher Education Area and harmonizing European degree structures, is being followed with concern by the European academic community, from students to administrators. In the universities, the Bologna Process has been received as if it were an inevitable step, something decreed from above, with the wheels already set in motion. The next step, at ministerial level, is the Berlin follow-up meeting to be held on 18–19 September 2003. It seems that many of those involved want to carry through actions the causes and consequences of which are, at the very least, unclear to most people.

It is, for instance, symptomatic that the Finnish Ministry of Education has changed its stance as the process has advanced. Immediately after the Bologna Declaration, in the summer of 1999, the ministry announced that the Finnish university degree system was already satisfactory, from the point of view of the Bologna Process, and that the Declaration would, in practice, have very little impact on Finnish higher education. However, when it became clear—at the time of the Finnish European Union presidency—that the role of Finland in European integration would require considerably greater commitment to the Bologna Process, and that the aims of the latter would have important dimensions in terms of domestic policy, the universities were given to understand that Finnish higher education degrees would have to undergo “massive reform”.

The universities, already accustomed to performance-based steering, no doubt considered it wise to strike while the iron was hot. Active planning of new Bachelor’s degrees was started in most institutions, and much thought was given to the problems involved. The Ministry of Education provided more grist to its mill when, at the beginning of 2002, it set up its own working group to prepare the transition to a two-tier degree system, and it became public knowledge that the project was urgent. The first rumours suggested that the new system would be fully adopted in autumn 2003. Eventually, the working group proposed autumn 2005, even though the EU documents aim at completion of the process by the year 2010 (OPM, 2002). Why? Does Finland once again want to be at the top of the class in Europe?
One of the problems relating to the preparatory work concerns the status of new degrees intended to correspond internationally with Bachelor’s-level degrees. The key EU dimension relating to this issue is known by the term employability, which, in itself, reveals how closely the integrative educational policy of the European Union is tied up with employment policy, and through it, related to the steering policy introduced by the OECD as early as the 1950s and 1960s (on OECD educational policy see, for example, Papadopoulos, 1994). Indeed, the background element of the whole project is the issue of European integration and competitiveness.

Without yet going into the question of why these so-called intermediate degrees were re-introduced into Finland in the early 1990s, before anyone had even heard of the Bologna Process, it can be said that in this matter, too, the Ministry of Education’s stance seems to be rather vague: now it seems that the three-year lower degree is not, after all, intended to aim at the kind of labour market relevance that can be inferred from the Bologna Declaration.

Finland, as one of the many small countries that remained outside the Sorbonne Declaration, looks askance at any action that goes against the principle of subsidiarity of the Union and wants to bring the Bologna Process closer to the official EU co-operation structures. But what, indeed, is this “Process”? It is not a phenomenon that sprang up from nowhere, even though the whole course of events seems to have started up very quickly after the Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations had been made.

This article is an attempt to investigate the background to the Bologna Process, which, in all the haste, has remained rather obscure. It examines how EEC/EU educational policy has reached a stage at which one can talk about a European Higher Education Area with reference to the concepts of harmonization and the Bologna Process. Since Bologna, there has been a direct transition, without too many questions being asked, to preparation for, and implementation of, the reforms. It is, of course, true that some changes relating to the aims of Bologna had already started in many countries other than Finland.

The situation can also be analyzed by looking at the broad process of change in the operational environment. According to Kurzer (2001), who has studied European integration from a cultural perspective, a process of gradual economic and institutional harmonization is taking place in Europe. It manifests itself in a decreasing number of distinct national decision-making patterns, thus leading to the assimilation of systems. The constant competition prevailing in the Single Market easily leads countries to favour formulae that have proved successful. In addition, continuous interaction leads to the copying of models in new situations.

Models that have been found to work in certain national environments may be absorbed into other national systems, regardless of whether they are logical and without questioning their validity, just because the decision makers do not necessarily know of other more effective solutions. One factor contributing to the convergence of systems is the existence of a language of universal, uniform politics and the consequent spread of uniform goals in European politics. This phenomenon, known as the New Consensus or the New Orthodoxy, simply means that the choice of solutions that have proved viable diminishes substantially as the agenda of international debate becomes limited by the emphasis on, and continued justification of, certain themes (see, for example, Ball, 1998, 2001). Can we discern dimensions of this kind in the Bologna Process?

In addition, this article examines possible future scenarios, focusing particularly on the Finnish situation. Why has Finland, once again, been so keen to embark on reforms? What does Finnish higher education policy aim to achieve through the Bologna Process, and what does it stand to gain from it?
PRESSURES FOR HARMONIZATION IN AN INTEGRATING EUROPE AND A GLOBALIZING WORLD

The background to the ascendancy of the European educational policy that has led to the Bologna Process reveals, on the one hand, broad structural changes carried out in the name of globalization, and, on the other, more concrete factors relating to European integration and regional development. Despite the abstract nature or lack of content associated with the term globalization, many decisions—often national ones—are made in its name. Since the problems in many countries are similar, decisions taken at national level to solve the problems of the given countries are often thought of as “meeting the challenges of globalization” (For a discussion of globalization, see Held et al., 1999.)

European integration and the development towards regionality are, in a way, counter-forces to globalization. Those who view globalization primarily as a myth consider, as a much more important development trend, the progressive division of the world economy into three distinct blocs: Europe, Asia, and America (Held et al., 1999). In the same way as economic integration is used to improve the competitiveness of Europe in comparison to competitors, improvement of the quality and structure of higher education is to be used as a means to compete in the global education market. For example, according to Teichler (2001), one of the factors behind the Bologna efforts was a meeting of European and Asian Prime Ministers, held at the beginning of the 1990s, following which the Europeans realized how completely the American Ivy League universities were sweeping up talented and mobile Asian university students. Many Education Ministries struggling with financial problems probably also hoped to open up a channel for the lucrative import of students, as has happened in Australia.

Examined from a broader perspective, the roots of the educational policy of the European Community go all the way back to the Treaty of Rome signed in 1957. It is there that one finds the clause based on the principle of subsidiarity, according to which educational issues are subject to national jurisdiction: “… while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organization of education systems…” (Treaty of Rome, 1957).

The European Community, however, took upon itself the task of supporting the development of education, especially of improving its quality, by encouraging the Member States to co-operate and by supplementing their activities, if necessary. The aim was first to develop a European “dimension” of education, which, initially, mainly involved knowledge of European languages. Another aim, which is central to this article, relates to the reciprocal recognition of degrees, which is still an essential part of the Bologna Process. In vocational education, the goal was to form a uniform policy that would improve the employment effect of the training and thus prevent youth unemployment. This goal is to be viewed against the background of widening European integration and increasing mobility (Ollikainen, 1999, pp. 67–71). The same goals were later written into the treaty establishing the European Union (the Maastricht Treaty).

The reciprocal recognition of degrees and legislation thereon is part of the Single Market legislation on the freedom of movement of Community citizens, according to which a qualified citizen of one Member State is qualified to carry on the same occupation in other Member States (OPM, 2001). In Finland, the legislation concerning the recognition of degrees came into force in 1994. Officially, the degree recognition project did not involve the harmonization of educational structures but agreement on the minimum requirements for the practicing of certain occupations and on procedures for agreeing on correspondence between qualifications. Thus, it is a question of developing the comparability of different
systems rather than of developing directly comparable systems, which is what some people think the rhetoric of harmonization in the Bologna Process suggests.

Whether or not increasing comparison and comparability will help to preserve the diversity of the systems or whether it will lead to competition according to certain indicators, and therefore to “spontaneous” harmonization, is another matter. One might also ask, like Lourtie (2001), what the grounds are for talking about assumed similarities in Europe:

A question, which is becoming more apparent as the process progresses, is that of which values and concepts, concerning higher education, are common or to what extent are they shared among the signatory countries.

Emphasizing the “European dimension” of higher education is one way of trying to legitimize the development of integration and new political action. There is a need to find a common European identity for the citizens of the Union in order to promote the harmonization of social structures throughout its area and to support the functioning of the Single Market. Despite the supposed post-modern disintegration of national identities, no broader consciousness of a common Europeanness has grown to take their place, at least so far. Euro-elections and various Euro-barometers simply reinforce the bare truth that the vague idea of a “European identity” is still far from being the everyday reality of EU citizens (Turunen, 2001; Kwiek, 2001; Ollikainen, 1999; Shaw, 1998).

Historically, in fact, education has proved to be a good instrument for building a common identity, so it has been considered necessary in higher education, too, to proceed via internationalization (student exchanges) towards active Europeanization. One might ask, however, whether in the case of higher education, which by its fundamental nature is international, it is not a question of simply legitimating “the Europe-project of an elite bureaucracy”, as one Finnish observer put it (Turunen, 2001, p. 26).

The economy and the labour market have already been integrated, to a great extent, in the EU area in the form of the Single Market. It is, therefore, fairly natural that education, too, which is supposed to produce qualified employees for the common labour market and thus to guarantee the economic competitiveness of Europe, be integrated and cast in the same mould. Attention has been drawn to those procedures that can be instrumental to building and implementing a common educational policy, since the European Union cannot regulate the educational systems of the Member States directly owing to the principle, mentioned above, of subsidiarity. According to Turunen, however, the European Union has, in this respect, made a typically flexible interpretation of the Maastricht Treaty: “If a matter is felt to be important, politically and economically, collision with the limits of the Treaty and conflicts of jurisdiction are avoided by taking action in a ‘neighbouring area’ where the Union has jurisdiction” (Turunen, 2001, p. 30).

One way of gaining access to education has been through strategies relating to the development of the information society. One goal of the “Europe of knowledge” (see Sorbonne, 1998) is to develop and increase human resources, which means more and better education as well as more and better research and development work. In the name of the latter goal, the idea of developing a European Research Area has been introduced parallel to that of the European Higher Education Area (Commission of the European Communities, 2000). In order for these strategies to work, the pillars of European employment policy must also be solid. They rest on the concepts of employability, entrepreneurship, adaptability, and equal opportunity (Ahola and Kivinen, 2001). The goal of employability, in particular, is closely connected with the degree structure reform of the Bologna Process.

Since the aim is to achieve continuous growth under the flag of an information/
knowledge society, the status of education is a continuous focus of both national and international strategies. The ministries responsible for European education and research have had the goal of lifting the role of educational policy, which has been viewed as ancillary to economic and employment policy, onto the center stage of EU strategy (Turunen, 2001). The long-standing co-operation and regular meetings between the Ministers of Education have, in a significant way, laid the groundwork for the Bologna Process. Various official and unofficial channels have been maintained for decades, and the co-operation has gradually become closer and more official in nature. Although the whole current of development and the Bologna Process itself received major boosts as a result of the Sorbonne Conference held in Paris in the summer of 1998, and the Bologna Conference held a year later, an interesting stand on harmonization had been taken as far back as 1974, in the final resolution of a meeting of Ministers of Education, which, in a way, crystallized the view of those responsible for national educational policies on the educational clause of the Treaty of Rome and on a common European educational policy (European Educational Policy Statements, 1987, p. 15):

Co-operation in education shall be based on the following principles:

(i) the programme of co-operation initiated in the field of education, whilst reflecting the progressive harmonization of the economic and social policies in the Community, must be adapted to the specific objectives and requirements of this field,
(ii) on no account must education be regarded merely as a component of economic life,
(iii) educational co-operation must make allowance for the traditions of each country and the diversity of their respective educational policies and systems.

Harmonization of these systems or policies cannot, therefore, be considered an end in itself. The above quotation can be interpreted as meaning that harmonization is, in principle, possible provided the special features of education, such as the national and cultural diversity of the systems, are taken into account. The harmonization of education cannot, in other words, be carried out in such a straightforward manner as, for instance, in the economic field, and neither should this be an end in itself. The Ministers of Education were also expressing—and they still do—their dissatisfaction with the fact that education has always been subordinated to the economic goals of the Union. When one examines the action taken as regards the Bologna Process, one is justified in asking to what extent the aims of the project have been considered purely from the perspective of higher education, and to what extent, with other objectives in mind.

SORBONNE—A CAREFULLY PLANNED POLICY INTERVENTION?

The Sorbonne Conference was not a conventional ministerial conference—it was a meeting held in connection with the 800th anniversary of the University of Paris, in May 1998, at which the Education Ministers of the United Kingdom, Italy, France, and Germany signed a joint declaration. The Sorbonne Declaration is a short, somewhat vaguely formulated document, the main objective of which is to achieve “harmonization of the architecture of the European higher education system”. The term, architecture, as used in the Declaration, refers to the general framework of degree systems and structures (van der Wende, 2000). The Declaration repeats the wish of the Education Ministers, as described above, to view education as a separate and important area in its own right, not merely as an instrument of economic policy:

The European process has very recently moved some extremely important steps
ahead. Relevant as they are, they should not make one forget that Europe is not only that of the Euro, of the banks and the economy: it must be a Europe of knowledge as well. (Sorbonne, 1998)

Alongside the potential educational reforms presented at a very general level, the most important outcome of the Declaration remained the “invitation” issued by the four countries that had taken the initiative. The signatories to the Declaration invited the other Member States and countries of Europe and the European universities to join in an effort to achieve the common goal to which the four signatory countries had committed themselves. What that goal actually is still remains obscure.

When one considers the political motives behind the initiative, it is easy enough to surmise that the signatories, with their traditionally strong higher education institutions, might have had some (national) reasons of their own for promoting “the common European good”. For example, the ability of the European universities to attract human and other resources from outside is an issue of direct concern to the major British, Italian, French, and German institutions.

On the other hand, the motives for an initiative like the Sorbonne Declaration should be sought in a broader context, in the position of EU educational policy in relation to the Member States, if and when the purpose is to harmonize the educational market. Even though education is still regarded as being strictly subject to national jurisdiction, the European Commission/European Union, ever since the 1970s, has enhanced its role in the education sector to the extent that today the Union can be seen as taking an active role in educational policy making (van der Wende, 2000; Ryba, 1992). However, harmonization goals that go further than well-meaning statements can only have originated from voluntary national initiatives like the Sorbonne Declaration.

The Sorbonne Declaration was received with some perplexity elsewhere in Europe. Although co-operation at ministerial level was an established international procedure, this new type of initiative certainly came as a surprise to many players in the field of higher education policy. In addition, the formulation of the Declaration and the rhetoric of harmonization used put national decision makers on the alert, and the proposal for harmonizing the structures of higher education—which was more in the nature of an announcement—was not received with unreserved approval. In addition, the vague and broad wording led to misinterpretations. One misinterpretation was the false association of the so-called 3–5–8 degree model with the Sorbonne Declaration, when in fact it derived from the Attali report, which was published almost simultaneously in France.

In 1997, Jacques Attali—a well-known economist who acted, among other things, as an advisor to President François Mitterrand—was assigned the task, by the French Ministry of Education, of assembling a working group that would envision the future direction of French higher education. The motive behind this initiative was simply the same problems and needs that affected the whole European Union on a broader scale: how to maintain the competitiveness of the system in an integrating “Europe of knowledge”. In order to perform his task, Attali called together a group of renowned intellectuals, including, for instance, Alain Touraine and Julia Kristeva.

The motive behind the French efforts was not only genuine concern for the quality of higher education but also, and especially, the fact that the French university model was not easily understood in the rest of Europe: in modern terms, it lacked transparency. On the other hand, to the French, “harmonization” meant the uniting of their bipartite system of Grandes Écoles versus the “ordinary universities”, and equalization of the educational opportunities attached to them, as well as the introduction of a more uniform nomenclature.
for the degrees. The reference made in the task of the report to a “European model of higher education” and the recommendation that a 3–5–8 degree structure be adopted was, for some reason, associated with the Sorbonne Declaration. Since France was one of the initiators, many interpreters have perhaps connected the harmonization rhetoric of the Declaration one-sidedly with the French dialogue on how the French higher education system should be developed to meet the challenge of international competition.

The Declaration, in fact, makes no mention of aiming at the 3–5–8 degree structure on a European level. Perhaps the vague talk about a two-tier degree structure that would be comparable within a European framework turned against itself in this respect, as many commentators interpreted it as a model proposed by the French. The image of harmoniza-
tion imposed from outside and of reform that deviated from the prevailing national models aroused understandable resistance among the other European countries (Pour un modèle européen . . . , 1998; Barblan, 1999).

Ultimately, in the reception of the Sorbonne Declaration, one can also perceive a very ordinary political confrontation. The open invitation issued by four countries was not acceptable to everyone—it was interpreted as an effort by the major EU countries to manipulate the course of development. In particular, the smaller countries in the Union were suspicious of the project and asked why they had not been invited to take part in preparatory work from the start. Thus, in the wake of the Sorbonne Declaration, attitudes were not purely favourable towards promoting the European dimension (Barblan, 1999).

BOLOGNA—THE TRIUMPH OF CONSENSUS?

As a result of the unfavourable discussion arising out of the Sorbonne Declaration, the EU Ministers of Education agreed, in a meeting held in Baden in the autumn of 1998, to set up a working group to monitor the effects of the Declaration. At the same time, a report financed by the Commission was being drafted by the Association of European Universities and the Conference of European Rectors on the development of higher education structures, which later became known as the Trends I report (see Knudsen et al., 1999).

Already at the Sorbonne Conference, the Italian Minister of Education, Luigi Berlinguer, had invited the other ministers to meet in Bologna in June 1999. The intention was to produce a more widely accepted declaration on increasing co-operation in the European higher education community. Although the above-mentioned monitoring group participated in the organization of the conference, the text of the Bologna Declaration (Bologna, 1999) was prepared mainly by the Italian Ministry of Education.

The European Ministers of Education thus met in Bologna, Italy, to discuss the future of European higher education. Although the perplexity following the Sorbonne Conference was still, to a certain extent, on the surface, the situation turned out to be very different from what it had been a year earlier. In addition to more than thirty ministerial-level participants, approximately 200 representatives of European higher education institutions had been invited to the conference. This pressure reveals that the members of the higher education community had already made sure that they would not be mere bystanders in a reform that would affect them.* The above-mentioned “Trends in Learning Structures in Higher Education” report (Knudsen et al., 1999) was presented as background material for the conference. After a short discussion based on the report, the ministers signed the Bologna Declaration in front of the international media. The general

* It should be mentioned that by 1988 the representatives of the European universities had signed the so-called Magna Charta Universitatum declaration to support the traditional autonomy of universities.
objective of the Declaration is the creation of a common European Higher Education Area by 2010 (Bologna, 1999).

The Bologna Declaration continues along the lines laid out at the Sorbonne Conference, stating rather pompously that the European process, which is not, however, defined more specifically, has become an increasingly concrete and relevant reality for the Union and its citizens.

A Europe of knowledge is now widely recognized as an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth and as an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship, capable of giving its citizens the necessary competencies to face the challenges of the new millennium, together with an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space.

Otherwise, Bologna added a slightly more detailed content to the European dimension as regards higher education. The central objectives to which the signatory countries committed themselves included the taking of concrete measures to increase the comparability of the European higher education systems, improving their international competitiveness and outward attractiveness, and raising the standard of European higher education, improving the European-wide labour market relevance of the degrees awarded, and increasing mobility (of students and the academic workforce). The careless formulation of the Sorbonne Declaration regarding harmonization had been abandoned. Those responsible for compiling the background report for Bologna even remembered to stress that a rigid and uniform European model was not a sustainable concept.

All in all, the wording and content of the Declaration were taken more or less directly from the background report and to some extent were already familiar from the Sorbonne Declaration (Haug, 1999). The most concrete aims of the Bologna Declaration relate to student mobility and to the reciprocal recognition of degrees, which are to be encouraged by developing the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and the so-called Diploma Supplement.

FROM BOLOGNA TO FINLAND

As mentioned above, Finland, like many other countries, had already begun to plan Bachelor’s-level degrees and other structural reforms even before the actual Bologna Process had come into being. One of the reasons behind the reform carried out in the early 1990s was the need, highlighted by the increasing internationalization of education, to create a comparable degree that would allow Finnish graduates to participate in international Master’s degree programmes. The competition created by the founding of polytechnics (AMKs) also required that the new level of qualification be given official status with its own degree. More down-to-earth reasons were the need to reduce the number of drop-outs, to speed up the flow of students through the system in view of the predicted shortage of labour, to enable the forging of new links with working life, and to lay a foundation on which to establish Finnish Master’s degree programmes.

The Bachelor’s degree has not, however, taken off, at least so far. Of all the lower and higher degrees taken at Finnish universities in 2001, only one in six was a lower degree. The most frequent graduates with lower degrees were in the humanities and the natural sciences (26 percent) and in education (25 percent). In the social sciences, an average number of graduates took the lower degree (17 percent) (Finnish Ministry of Education, KOTA Database).

The heart of the problem is that the Bachelor’s-level degree still has the status of an
intermediate degree in Finland. Students may take it if they like, but it is not compulsory. When they enter the university, students gain the right to take a Master’s degree, which is the basic degree in the Finnish system. In this respect, the working group of the ministry is not, however, proposing any changes (OPM, 2002). There is, therefore, good reason to ask how far the wording of the Bologna Declaration presupposes a Bachelor’s-level degree as the general basic degree in European higher education. The Declaration formulates the question as follows:

Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate. Access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of three years.

In the opinion of the authors, the issue is made exceptionally clear: in order to continue to Master’s degree-level studies, a candidate should have earned a sufficiently strong lower degree. The idea of limiting the right to study to the Bachelor’s degree and of organizing a new student selection process for Master’s and doctoral degrees is difficult for the Ministry of Education to accept because student unions, in particular, are strongly opposed to the idea. The right to study directly for a Master’s degree is a privilege that students will not easily give up. Another question that is still unanswered is how the parties involved in the labour market, and the labour market itself, will react to the increasing emphasis on Bachelor’s-level degrees. It is, however, certain that at least as long as the academic community in Finland interprets the reform as lowering the required qualifications, it will not accept the reform.

There is a small but far-reaching deviation in the assignment of the preparatory working group set up by the Finnish Ministry of Education, as compared to the wording stated above, of the Bologna Declaration:

to draw up a proposal for the action needed to change [the] basic university degree structure into a two-tier structure … in which students first take a bachelor-level degree, normally taking three years and thereafter, if they so wish, a basically two-year master-level degree. (OPM, 2002)

In assessing the reasons for all these changing stances, references can be found to the educational policy strategy of the ministry in the memorandum of the working group dealing with European Union co-operation (OPM, 2001), which states that “we can accept active European co-operation on education policy because it has promoted the development of the Finnish education system and because jointly established European goals and co-operation are important to us”. The latter reason represents the typical Finnish attitude towards the European Union: stressing European co-operation is part of “a small country’s strategy”, in which, by being active, it tries to assure its own opportunities as a nation to influence the course of events. This approach is also highly likely to promote a European consensus and the convergence of national systems.

The other reasoning, developing the educational system, links a project like Bologna in a “natural” way to the preceding general trends in educational policy in Finland. One central aim has been to rationalize the Finnish system, which has become massified and regionally and functionally over-diversified. It remains to be seen whether or not the structural development of the whole higher education system, which has certainly not proceeded in the way hoped by the Ministry of Education, will be boosted by the Bologna Process.

When one is reminded of all the acute problems, some of which are evident also in other European countries—the “matriculation bottleneck” (e.g., Ahola, 2002), the mismatch of demand and supply, the massive system of entrance examinations, prolonged studying and
high drop-out rates, and the unhealthy features of the competition between the universities and AMKs—the Bologna Process can also be viewed as a possibility. The first-cycle Bachelor’s-level degree could, for instance, become a common first degree for the entire higher education system, which does not mean, however, that the AMKs would somehow lose their special character. Admission to the first cycle could be much simpler than it is now, and in some fields enrollments could be increased to better match social demand. In comparison, the selection criteria for postgraduate studies could be tightened but, at the same time, flexibility in the transition from Bachelor’s degree to Master’s degree could be increased.

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